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George Orwell's Anti-Catholicism

CATHOLIC READERS AND CRITICS have praised George Orwell's rejection of totalitarianism in his famous novel *1984*, and his critique of what Orwell saw as Stalin's corruption of the Bolshevik revolution in his political fable, *Animal Farm*. This praise is appropriate. In *1984*, Orwell, a long-time socialist, describes the horrors of a system that subsumed all individual liberty to the power of a totalitarian political party; likewise, in *Animal Farm*, he unflinchingly describes the realities of Stalin's rise to power.

But, as Catholics, we should not attribute Orwell's insights to a Christian perspective. His insights resulted from his commitment to objective truth. Orwell examined the ideologies of the right and the left in the light of lived experience and reason, but he did so without the illumination provided by faith and an understanding of man's unique place in creation and the special role of the Catholic Church in bringing light and life to mankind. Orwell was an agnostic who recognized that Western Civilization owed much to Christianity, but he denigrated the importance of faith in the lives of individual human beings. He was nostalgic for the language and liturgy of the Church of England, but he considered all religions as remnants of a presci-

entific epoch. In addition, Orwell was vehemently anti-Catholic. Throughout his adult life, Orwell consistently attacked the church and her adherents. By using the divine gift of reason and the natural virtue of honesty, Orwell reached conclusions that are compatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding the rights of man and the dignity of labor. He did not, however, perceive this connection. He lived and died as an enemy of the Catholic Church.

George Orwell was born Eric Blair in 1903. He was the son of a conventional member of the colonial British government of India and a sometimes unconventional housewife whose friends were Fabian socialists and whose female relatives were active in the suffragette movement. He was baptized in the Anglican Church as a baby, but he did not mature as a Christian. In fact, Orwell reported that until he was fourteen years old he accepted "mechanically the Christian religion without having any sort of affection for it."¹ Further, Orwell stated that rather than loving God as he was enjoined to do, he "hated him, just as I hated Jesus."² Orwell's understanding of the Trinity was incomplete to say the least.

As an adult, Orwell rejected all religious belief as a sign of intellectual immaturity—"pie in the sky"³ thinking—that was a hallmark of earlier ages of human history but was unnecessary and untenable in the twentieth century. Orwell's antireligious stance led him to the astounding proposition that "the common people are without definite religious belief, and have been so for centuries."⁴ His antireligious stance was especially severe regarding "those stinking Catholics"⁵ and the Catholic Church, which he described as "parasitic."⁶

According to Christopher Hollis, one of Orwell's early biographers and a convert to Catholicism, Orwell's conception of man and the purpose of human existence was that "[m]an should be decent and happiness is the end of man."⁷ Orwell did recognize that many men, even if they are happy, do not act in "decent" ways. They could, in fact, act in very selfish and inhumane ways. Hollis believes that Orwell was, in effect, faced with the question: "What sanction could

one provide that would induce the bad to behave decently?”⁸ In his book, *A Study of George Orwell: The Man and His Works*, Hollis points out that in various essays Orwell demonstrates that he understands that religion offers an answer to this question; that is, if wrongdoing is not punished in this life, it will be punished in the next, and virtue will then be rewarded. According to this line of reasoning, virtue is motivated by the certainty of eventual reward or punishment. Such a view, of course, omits the motive of Charity, in which one acts because of love of God for his own sake and love of neighbor because one’s neighbor is also God’s creation and loved by him.

Hollis believes that Orwell’s rejection of religion was based on “the argument of *consensus universalis* turned inside out.”⁹ For Orwell, religious sanctions were not usable as a basis for morality because mankind—in almost all cases—does not believe in these sanctions. Orwell argued, according to Hollis, that many people do not subscribe to religious faith, and of those who do, their conduct reflects their actual belief: they live as if death is the absolute end of life, the values of this world are the only values, and there is no punishment to face in an afterlife.¹⁰ Thus, for Orwell, religion “was not so much false as valueless.”¹¹ Still, the absence of religion as a true moral force in the world creates a void. In his essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” Orwell writes, “[t]he major problem of our time is the decay of the belief in personal immortality.”¹² Orwell recognized this decay as one of the major issues in the world after the time of Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud. Orwell was not immune from this problem. But, at least at times, he was drawn to religious faith and observance. Eventually, though not committing himself to a statement of belief, he did call for a return to a “religious attitude”¹³ as an antidote to the meaninglessness and selfishness of his contemporary world while “accepting death as final.”¹⁴ Orwell did not explain how such a dual perspective could be maintained. He recognized the vacuous quality of the nihilism that was already undermining Western Civilization, and he knew that belief—a “religious attitude”—was the remedy. The only belief system that Orwell ever

proposed could be summed up as people should treat one another decently because doing so makes sense in the light of natural law. But, without the further insight that men enjoy a unique relationship with their creator while on earth and this relationship continues and is enhanced in eternity, Orwell could only appeal to mankind's innate sense of justice without the ennobling and altruistic dimensions provided by Christianity. This has never proved to be sufficient to overcome meaninglessness and selfishness.

Hollis says that Orwell based his views on his observation of mankind's actual behavior.¹⁵ If Hollis is correct, Orwell's conclusions are understandable to a point. But, it would seem that Orwell had a very underdeveloped sense of temptation and sin, and, perhaps, no concept at all of divine mercy and forgiveness. One can wonder what sort of religious upbringing Orwell received as a child and why he did not seem to understand the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Did he easily dismiss this aspect of his life because it was not important to his parents? Did Orwell's emotional makeup, a contrary, individualistic personality combined with a highly developed sense of identification with those less fortunate in society, prevent him from accepting a faith that seemed to him to require conformity of the individual and identification with those who oppress the weak? Or was it simply that Orwell chose to reject Christianity because it seemed untenable to him once he had read Darwin, Samuel Butler, and others? This final possibility seems the most plausible in light of Orwell's own statement that it is impossible for an educated person to maintain religious belief.¹⁶

In a nostalgic poem written in 1935, Orwell claimed that he could have been "A happy vicar" if he had been born "Two hundred years ago, / To preach upon eternal doom / And watch my walnuts grow." But because he had been born in the "evil" twentieth century, such an uncomplicated and comforting religious belief was not possible.¹⁷ Hollis suggests that if Orwell had lived longer this would not have been his final stance relative to religious faith because Orwell recognized that "mere fashion" is not a basis for religious

belief. However, world events intruded and “complicated his philosophizing.”¹⁸ Hollis thinks that if the times had been less gruesome, Orwell could have undertaken a “more serious examination of religion’s claims”¹⁹ and, supposedly, come to belief. This argument assumes a great deal, not the least of which is that Orwell would have allowed himself to examine the claims of faith without employing his characteristic obstinacy. We will never know, of course, if Orwell would have responded to God’s freely given gift of faith if he had lived longer. We do know, however, that between April 1932 and December 1933 Orwell participated in the liturgical and sacramental life of an Anglican parish in Hayes, Middlesex, England.

Orwell had become headmaster at a small, unprestigious private school for boys in Hayes. He befriended the local Anglican vicar, Mr. Parker, and his wife. Orwell described Parker as his “sole friend” and a man who was “High Anglican but not a creeping Jesus” and “a very good fellow.”²⁰ Mr. Parker always referred to the liturgy as the mass. Orwell attended mass, which he described as “an arduous job,” because “the service is so popish that I don’t know my way about it and feel an awful BF [slang for Bloody Fool] when I see everyone bowing and crossing themselves all around me and can’t follow suit.”²¹

In letters to his friend Eleanor Jaques, a Secular Humanist, Orwell seems to make fun of his involvement with the official state religion. He wrote to Jaques,

I take the *Church Times* regularly and like it more every week. I do so like to see that there is life in the old dog yet—I mean the poor old C. of E. I shall have to go to Holy Communion soon, hypocritical tho’ it is, because my curate friend is bound to think it funny if I always go to Church but never communicate.²²

Bernard Crick, in his biography, *George Orwell, A Life*, wonders if Orwell was deceiving Parker, Jaques, or himself at this point in his life. Perhaps Orwell, his smugness aside, was actually giving himself, at age twenty-nine, the opportunity to reconnect with his religious

roots, shallow though they were, in the hope that they could sustain and nourish him.

Parker's wife reported to Crick that during his time in Hayes, Orwell served at mass twice a week and attended services on Sunday. She also remembered that on more than one occasion Orwell had assisted her husband in giving the last rites to dying members of the congregation.²³ Was Orwell simply curious about the religious rituals? Was he seeking to connect to his roots? By observing the faith of Reverend Parker and his parishioners was Orwell testing the possibility of faith in his own life? Was he, consciously or not, gathering impressions and details for possible use in his writings? Was he simply being a friend to the Parkers? We do not know.

Crick comments that Orwell "went fairly far if he was just obliging friends."²⁴ For example, Orwell "washed up" after Church Guild meetings, he often had tea or supper with the Parkers, and he helped with chores at the church, including chopping wood and filling up the coal buckets.²⁵

In addition to performing these chores, Orwell took the initiative to refurbish various aspects of the church itself. One of Orwell's former students, Geoffrey Stevens, reported to Crick that Orwell brought church ornaments into the school for the boys to paint and gild.²⁶ Crick also reports that Orwell noticed that the crown of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was tarnished. After receiving permission to do so, he cleaned the statue in onion water. He then wrote a mocking account of the episode in a letter to Jaques: "promised to paint one of the church idols, a quite skittish-looking BVM . . . and I shall try to make her look as much like one of the illustrations in *La vie parisienne* as possible."²⁷

Crick believes that the Parkers and Orwell were compatible because of their mutual interest in the welfare of working-class people and the unemployed. They were also well matched because of their irreverent sense of humor. For instance, the Parkers taught Orwell to milk the "Holy Goat" they kept in their garden.²⁸

Mrs. Parker was not certain as to whether she, her husband, and Orwell had already made any formal commitment to socialism before or during the time they knew each other in Hayes, but she told Crick that if they had not yet “fully” committed themselves to socialism, they did so “soon” afterward.²⁹

While Orwell was engaged in what Crick calls his “ironic attachment to the liturgy, the humane political compromises and the traditions of the Church of England,”³⁰ Orwell maintained his anti-Catholic attitudes. In an unsigned review of Karl Adams’s *The Spirit of Catholicism* in June 1932, Orwell praised the book for being free of “silly cleverness” (an indirect slap at Chesterton, perhaps, whom Orwell had once admired and then came to detest), but he warned that the Catholic Church must be “taken seriously” because its “dogmatic intolerance” is a “more proper target for anti-clerical feeling” than the “poor, unoffending old Church of England.”³¹ The sentimental and nostalgic tone of Orwell’s appeal may be surprising, but Orwell has been described as a “rebel in love with 1910”—with the England of his boyhood.

Love for an institutional and traditional church is not the same as religious faith, and Orwell may have ultimately settled for a sentimental relationship to the Church of England because he could not or would not divorce himself from the prevailing ideologies of the twentieth century and allow himself to believe in Christianity. A few days before his death in January 1950, Orwell specified in his will that his body be “buried (not cremated) according to the rites of the Church of England and in the nearest convenient cemetery.”³² Orwell’s friend, Malcolm Muggeridge, who would eventually convert to Catholicism, secured the services of a vicar in London for the service, and another friend, David Astor, found a plot in “the beautiful churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire.”³³ Crick muses, “[p]erhaps Orwell’s request was not so surprising. He loved the land and he loved England and he loved the language and the liturgies of the English Church.”³⁴ These may have been the only

motives operating on Orwell. On the other hand, a socialist himself, Crick perhaps finds it impossible to imagine that Orwell may, indeed, have had a rekindling of religious belief during the last months of his life when he was suffering from tuberculosis. In any case, Orwell never became sentimental, nostalgic, or even rightly informed about Catholicism.

Orwell did not encounter Catholics in any large number until 1936, when he visited Lancashire while collecting information for his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Hollis says that Orwell "liked" these people, but this was at a time when Orwell was discovering that "in all societies the ambitious few use and misrepresent their followers."³⁵ Hollis does not know why Orwell decided that this was especially applicable to the "Catholic World," but Orwell considered it so. Orwell also realized that literary Catholics such as Chesterton were generally conservative, but that the Catholic working men he had encountered "voted socialist and hated the Tories."³⁶ He saw, therefore, that the literary Catholics could not be speaking for the entire Catholic population.

Orwell's presentation of Catholicism in *The Road to Wigan Pier* reveals that he was unfamiliar with Catholicism's beliefs and its stance toward the world. For instance, Orwell imagined that because many Catholic working men in Lancashire read *The Daily Worker*, they would be duped into believing communist propaganda as, he thought, they had been duped into believing Catholic propaganda.³⁷ Orwell probably could not imagine that these men realized, to some degree, at least, that the two worldviews—that of Christ's Church and that of Marx and Engels—were fundamentally incompatible, and, therefore, they would ultimately reject communism. Orwell, for all of his concern about the lower classes, did not have a great deal of faith in their ability to make distinctions about important issues. Further, Orwell saw that Catholic and Communist Party leaders operated in similar ways to manipulate their followers. As a committed socialist, Orwell viewed communism as a betrayal rather

than as a fulfillment of the socialist ideal. He believed that just as communist leaders emphasized a doctrine and a vocabulary that their followers did not care about, so too the Catholic intelligentsia promoted ideas in a language unintelligible to their followers—the “decent” working-class people in Lancashire. According to Orwell, both monolithic systems, communism and Catholicism, advanced agendas that were mostly unimportant to their followers in languages that were unintelligible.³⁸ One may ask how either communism or Catholicism could have advanced and made converts if Orwell’s critique were completely accurate.

Up to this point in his career, Orwell could be dismissive of Catholicism. But, when he went to Spain in December 1936 to fight in the Spanish Civil War, he encountered Catholicism as a potent cultural and political force. Not surprisingly, Orwell lumped the Spanish Church and its adherents together as part of the fascist block that was attempting to thwart the democratic spirit, which for Orwell, was associated with the parties of the left.³⁹ Orwell had always contended that only a small number of people who identified themselves as Christians actually believed in Christianity, at least as far as a belief in an afterlife and ultimate judgment. Orwell saw his experience in Spain as confirming his views. For instance, Orwell decided that the absence of religious motifs on tombstones and the absence of people using the sign of the cross must indicate that most Spaniards did not believe in Catholicism.⁴⁰ In addition, he admitted that Catholic churches were “pillaged everywhere” because the Spanish in Catalonia and Aragon (where Orwell was), understood that the Catholic Church in Spain was “part of the capitalist racket” and, as such, was committed to exploiting the Spanish people and preventing the establishment of democracy (socialism) in Spain.⁴¹ Under the leftist regime, which Orwell desired and for which he fought, he presumed that the “Spanish Church will come back; as the saying goes, night and the Jesuits always return.”⁴² But because Orwell assumed that relatively few Spaniards believed in Catholicism, he thought that the church could be tolerated in the new,

democratic Spain as long as it did not have any political power.⁴³

Hollis points out that Orwell admitted he was ignorant of the strong tradition of Spanish Catholicism, a tradition that had produced saints and mystics and devotional literature. Orwell claimed that the ordinary Spanish peasant or worker was ignorant of this tradition as well.⁴⁴ Hollis reminds us that the “overwhelming majority of Spanish religious, male and female, had proved that they at least sincerely believed the faith which they professed” by their martyrdom.⁴⁵ On the other hand, according to Hollis, in “many regions of Spain the proportion of people in general that either practised or knew its religion was very small.”⁴⁶ Still, Francisco Franco sought Catholic support, and Catholic peasants and workers fought for the Loyalists while other Catholic peasants and workers fought for the Republicans in the war.⁴⁷ Orwell’s view, which remained unchanged throughout his life, was that Catholicism was an antidemocratic political force because of the association of some Spanish Catholics with Franco.

While Orwell was and remained vehemently anti-Catholic, he was also staunchly against totalitarianism in any form—whether of the right or left. As a writer, he was concerned about free expression, and he clearly recognized the threat totalitarian regimes posed to writers. He thought that society and literature always suffer when writers submit to any authority, whether secular or ecclesiastical. Orwell disliked all “smelly orthodoxies,” including, in his view, Catholicism. But he recognized that orthodoxies of the past, such as the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, were consistent in outlook. According to Orwell, a writer who submitted to church doctrines surrendered his liberty, but at least he did so to a worldview that was consistent over time. The party line of totalitarians, however, changed constantly and their followers were expected to accept each newest version of the Party’s truth. Orwell describes this process in *Animal Farm* when the pigs change the original commandments to serve their pursuit of power and domination. Winston Smith, in the novel 1984, is employed in the Ministry of Truth, a bureaucracy that exists to promulgate the most recent version of

the party's "truth." Likewise, Orwell described the mental gymnastics required of the Communist Party faithful regarding the Nazis prior to and during World War II. With these mental contortions in mind, Orwell said that it was "possible for an honest man to accept Catholic doctrine," though it would be a "mistake" for him to do so. "But it was not possible for an honest man to accept all the twists and turns of the Communist party line."⁴⁸

In the same vein, Orwell expressed his concern about the integrity of writers whose commitment to any political agenda led them to uncritically support everything related to their position and to denigrate anything that opposed their views without regard to "truth." For Orwell, it was this unquestioning support that the Spanish War had demanded and, which, he believed, would lead to catastrophe for writers and for society. Commenting on the expectations imposed on writers by both sides in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell wrote, "There are only two things that you were allowed to say and both of them were palpable lies."⁴⁹

Orwell discusses the issue of a writer's loyalty in his essay "Notes on Nationalism." In the essay, Orwell says that both the Communist Party and the Catholic Church demand unswerving loyalty.⁵⁰ And, in his essay "Prevention of Literature," Orwell tries to make the case that Catholicism inhibited certain forms of literature such as the novel and prose literature in general.⁵¹

In the same essay, Orwell also compares the communist and the Catholic by asserting that they are alike in "assuming that an opponent cannot be both honest and intelligent."⁵² He says that both believe that their "truth" has been revealed and that anyone who rejects this truth does so for "selfish motives," that is, the heretic knows the truth but willfully pretends that the truth is a lie.⁵³ Once again, Orwell's lack of empathy for Catholicism and his lack of knowledge about church teaching and tradition are evident. Faith is a supernatural gift that each person is free to accept or reject. For those who reject the gift, or some aspects of the gift such as church

doctrine, the motives may be "selfish" but not necessarily perverse. Likewise, Catholics traditionally have been taught to be respectful of the motives of those who will not or cannot accept church teaching.

Orwell's harsh and unfair characterization of Catholicism and Catholics is perhaps somewhat understandable if we remember Hollis's perspective that Orwell "did not pretend to know anything about Catholic theology."⁵⁴ After 1936, Orwell's understanding of faith was based on what he witnessed in Spain and what he saw of the behavior of some Catholic journalists who supported Franco. Hollis says that Orwell "is not altogether to be blamed if from that experience he did not derive any especial impression that Catholics had always an ambition to ascribe motives as high as possible to those who did not accept their faith."⁵⁵

Whatever the causes of his dislike of Catholicism and of Catholics, Orwell thought of himself as a man of integrity and a seeker of truth. This self-assessment is accurate, but Orwell's antipathy to creeds and authority militated against the possibility of his accepting the gift of faith that he had been given in baptism. Likewise, his lack of any theological foundation prevented him from entertaining the possibility that "Truth" is not a thing but a person—Jesus Christ—the second person of the Trinity. But Orwell did understand, to some degree, that Western civilization had lost a great deal when it ceased to be committed to Christianity and its doctrines. Orwell wrote in one of his columns in *Tribune* in 1944,

There is little doubt that the modern cult of power worship is bound up with the modern man's feeling that life here and now is the only life there is. If death ends everything, it becomes much harder to believe that you can be in the right even if you are defeated. Statesmen, nations, theories, causes are judged almost inevitably by the test of material success. Supposing that one can separate the two phenomena, I would say that the decay of the belief in personal immortality has been as important as the rise of machine civilisation. . . .

I do not want the belief in life after death to return, and in

any case it is not likely to return. What I do point out is that its disappearance has left a big hole, and that we ought to take notice of that fact. . . . One cannot have any worth-while picture of the future unless one realises how much we have lost by the decay of Christianity.⁵⁶

As he had done in so many instances, Orwell correctly identified a significant problem—the worship of power—and its cause—the “decay” or loss of belief in Christianity. But he failed to recognize the solution: belief in God and in his church. Orwell had rejected such belief as the “easy” solution many years before. Unfortunately, this gifted and creative writer was not able to see Catholicism as anything other than a delusion and a fetter on mankind’s struggle for liberty, rather than the very embodiment of liberty and human dignity.

Notes

1. Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell: The Man and His Works* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956), 42.
2. Ibid.
3. John Rodden, “Orwell and Catholicism: The Religious Fellow Traveler,” *Commonweal* 111 (1984): 467.
4. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), II: 59.
5. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 150.
6. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell: An Age Like This, 1920–1940*, ed. By Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), I: 271.
7. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 42.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Orwell, *Collected Essays: My Country Right or Left*, II: 265.
13. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: As I Please, 1943–1945*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), III: 244.
14. Ibid.

15. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 43.
16. Rodden, "Orwell and Catholicism," 467.
17. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 89
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Orwell, *Collected Essays: An Age Like This*, I: 81.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 103.
23. Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 142.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 139.
27. Orwell, *Collected Essays: An Age Like This*, I: 82.
28. Crick, *George Orwell*, 142.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 143.
31. Orwell, *Collected Essays: An Age Like This*, I: 81.
32. Crick, *George Orwell*, 404.
33. Ibid., 405.
34. Ibid.
35. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 89.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 90.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 92.
40. Ibid., 92-93.
41. Ibid., 93.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 93-94.
46. Ibid., 94.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 169.
49. Ibid., 173.
50. Orwell, *Collected Essays: As I Please*, III: 363.
51. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, IV: 59-72.
52. Ibid., 61.
53. Ibid.
54. Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 174.
55. Ibid., 174-75.
56. Orwell, *Collected Essays: As I Please*, III: 103.